

Parkland College

A with Honors Projects

Honors Program

2017

"Casa Tomada" by Julio Cortazar

Mia Radanavong
Parkland College

Recommended Citation

Radanavong, Mia, ""Casa Tomada" by Julio Cortazar" (2017). *A with Honors Projects*. 212.
<https://spark.parkland.edu/ah/212>

Open access to this Essay is brought to you by Parkland College's institutional repository, [SPARK: Scholarship at Parkland](https://spark.parkland.edu). For more information, please contact spark@parkland.edu.

Mia Radanavong

LAS 189-001

Amber Landis

November 28, 2017

Honor IM: "Casa Tomada" by Julio Cortazar

BEGINNINGS

I have not read many Spanish short stories before. I am somewhat familiar with the author, Julio Cortazar. I know that the title of this artifact "Casa Tomada" means "House Taken Over." I think that this artifact will be about a house that was taken over by invaders during a significant event in Latin American history. Although I have not read many Spanish short stories, I have read several novels in Spanish. Some Spanish novels that I have read are *Cajas de Carton* by Francisco Jimenez and *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez. Both novels talk about Latin American hardships through countries, such as Mexico and the Dominican Republic. Prior to being introduced to the artifact, I know that there have been numerous historic events throughout Latin American history. These events vary from the Conquest of the Aztec and Inca Empires in the early 1500s to the Mexican-American War in the early 1800s.

ELEMENTS

The first element in the magical realism short story is loneliness. Loneliness is shown in the beginning of the story. It describes how Irene and the narrator enjoy being alone. According to the text, it states, "Nos habituamos Irene y yo a persistir solos en ella..." ("Irene and I got used to staying in the house by ourselves..."). It is made clear that the siblings have lived together alone for a while without anyone to bother them. There are no other people surrounding them

because they are closed off from the community. In the text it also mentions:

Nos resultaba grato almorzar pensando en la casa profunda y silenciosa y como nos no nos dejó casarnos. Irene rechazó dos pretendientes sin major motivo, a mi se me murió Maria Esther antes que llegáramos a comprometernos. Entramos en los cuarenta años con la inexpresada idea de que el nuestro, simple y silencioso matrimonio de hermanos, era necesaria clausura de la genealogía asentada por nuestros bisabuelos en nuestra casa.

(It was pleasant to take lunch and commune with the great hollow, silent house, and it was enough for us just to keep it clean. We ended up thinking, at times, that that was what had kept us from marrying. Irene turned down two suitors for no particular reason, and Maria Esther went and died on me before we could manage to get engaged.)

It is implied that Irene and the narrator do not want to engage with the outside world away from their house. Specifically, the house is controlling their lives to block them off from living their lives. The artifact shows loneliness through the siblings' lives since they each do not have a partner or friends. It is saying that the old aristocracy is lonely because a new order is taking over.

The second element in the magical realism short story is the unknown. The unknown is shown through the dialogue in the text. When the siblings move in different places of the house, there is something or someone that messes up their daily routines. For example, when the narrator goes to the kitchen to heat the kettle, he has to shut the door to the passage. The narrator says, "Han tornado parte del fondo." ("They've taken over the back part.") Irene responds saying, "tendremos que vivir en este lado." ("we'll have to live on this side."). Cortázar begins to use magical realism to get readers to think about who "they" are. The siblings are avoiding something that is bothering them as if they were people or unknown beings. In

addition, the element unknown is shown when the narrator returns to the kitchen for a glass of water. The narrator adds:

"Desde la puerta del dormitorio (ella tejía) oí ruido en la cocina; tal vez en la cocina o tal vez en el baño porque el codo del pasillo apagaba el sonido. A Irene le llamó la atención mi brusca manera de detenerme, y vino a mi lado sin decir palabra.

("From the door of the bedroom (she was knitting) I heard the noise in the kitchen; if not the kitchen, then the bath, the passage off at that angle dulled the sound).

It is obvious that the siblings are afraid of something. The noises give the siblings a sense of paranoia that there are mysterious invaders in the house that they have to escape from. The artifact shows the unknown through the house because no one knows who is chasing after them. This means that the new force taking over Argentina is unknown and is a bit frightening for the old landowners.

The third element in the magical realism short story is complacency. Complacency is shown when the siblings are disconnected from their additions. Irene is addicted to knitting and the narrator is addicted to reading French novels. They both feel completely lost when they have to give up their hobbies because of mysterious noises in the house. The narrator states:

"Mis libros de literatura francesa, por ejemplo, estaban todos en la biblioteca. Irene pensó en una botella de Hesperidin de muchos años. Con frecuencia (pero esto solamente sucedió los primeros días) cerníamos algún cajón de las cómodas y nos mirábamos con tristeza.

(My collection of French literature, for example, was still in the library. Irene had left several folios of stationery and a pair of slippers that she used a lot in the winter. I missed my briar pipe, and Irene, I think, regretted the loss of an ancient bottle of

Hesperidin's. It happened repeatedly (but only in the first few days) that we would close some drawer or cabinet and look at one another sadly).

The siblings made it clear that they do not want to change how they live their lives. They are comfortable with each other and what they do. The artifact shows that the siblings are complacent because the wealthier class do not have anything to do, but knit and read books. It is a critique of their complacency in favor of the new working class.

FORM

The overall form of this artifact is a magical realism short story. This short story is originally written in Spanish and translated in English. The English version is translated by a man named Paul Blackburn. He uses the Calibri font throughout his translation, which is one of the sophisticated, modern font types. Julio Cortazar, who is the author of this short story, used Georgia font, which is an elegant 19th century font type. The title "Casa Tomada" is Spanish for "House Taken". In Blackburn's version, the title is translated to "House Taken Over". The English version of the short story has 15 paragraphs with the use of dialogue towards the end, whereas the Spanish version has 13 paragraphs with the use of dialogue towards the end.

Additionally, the narrator uses 1st person point-of-view to make personal connections with the events that have happened in the house. Mid-level vocabulary is used with words "indispensable" and "brusquely". Cortazar creates a dark and obscure tone throughout the short story by using literary devices and symbolism. Personification is used when the narrator states, "A veces llegabamos a creer que era ella la que no nos dejó casarnos" ("We came to believe that it was her that would not let us marry"). The author is implying that the house is personified as a person, which symbolizes the control that the house has over the siblings.

MAKER

Julio Cortazar was born in Brussels, Belgium in 1914. His family is from Argentina. He is the son of an Argentine diplomat who was stationed in Belgium. Since Cortazar was born during wartime in Europe, the family moved a lot. The family moved around Europe for two years "settling at various cities including Zurich, Geneva and Barcelona. Cortazar was five before they moved to Buenos Aires in 1919." His family did not stay connected when he was a child. Shortly after they moved, his father left his mother. She was left to take care of "Cortazar and his younger sister by herself." Aside from the fact that his father left, Cortazar was often sick. He spent much of his time reading in bed. "Because he was sick a lot, Cortazar spent a lot of time reading. His mother was multilingual and introduced him to different authors, including Jules Verne" (Study.com) Although, Cortazar was often sick as a child, he was well-educated. By the age of 18, he obtained a qualification as an elementary school teacher. Additionally, "he took up studying philosophy and languages from the University of Buenos Aires." Later, he became a translator and an educator. Later, "he settled in France for political reasons and became more involved with politics as he grew older. He was especially concerned with human rights abuses occurring in Latin American. He died in 1984" (Study.com)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the colonial period there was a system called the "hacienda system" in Spanish America. This system is "referred to a form of large landed estate system that acted as a traditional institution of rural life". These systems were "originally profit-making enterprises and owned by hacendados" also known as "landowners." Hundreds of years ago, haciendas were originated in land grants that were mainly made to Spanish conquistadors. "Hernan Cortes, a Spanish conquistador, was one of the first hacendados to be granted land in 1529 in what is today

part of the present-day Mexico" (Word Atlas). South America is well-known for their haciendas. Rural labor was heavily enforced in the Andean region. In the Andean region of South America, "Spanish settlers used forced indigenous labor to work the land implemented by the Encomienda system" (History of the Haciendas). This system was enforced by the Spanish crown. The purpose of the encomienda system was to regulate and control American Indian labor and behavior during the colonization of the Americas. This system also granted a settler a specific number of natives to take responsibility for. The responsibilities of the encomenderos "were to teach these natives the Spanish language and Catholicism as well as use this indigenous population for labour, similar to slavery. This was the original system, but all the countries have their own history and so do their haciendas" (History of Haciendas). In result, the encomenderos also became hacendados. When the encomienda system was eliminated by the crown, "the hacendados continued to recruit free labor to work on their estates, where crops like sugar, wheat, fruits, and vegetables were grown" (World Atlas). Therefore, the term "hacienda" had a broader definition at times. This term would refer to "those ranch lands granted unto people in Latin America where animal agriculture was practiced and, even less frequently, those granted estates where manufacturing, mineral extraction, and other non-agricultural endeavors were engaged in."

PURPOSE

This magical realism short story is directed towards Spanish and English speakers who enjoy literature. Since "Casa Tomada" was first published in 1947 in a literary magazine by Jorge Luis Borges, people who enjoy reading magazines are another audience group. Additionally, people who have an interest in mystery and are unfamiliar with Julio Cortazar's work can learn more about him by reading his short stories. Since Cortazar has the tendency to

fool people's brains and make them think deeply about complex topics, he relates to people who enjoy thinking beyond the surface level. Not only that, but people who are interested in learning about other cultures can learn about some aspects of Latin American history.

I think that the goal of the short story "Casa Tomada" is to let readers imagine how magical realism can be shown through literary devices and symbolism. Since this short story was translated in two languages, the interpretations of the story can be different. Also, I believe that Cortazar's intention of writing "Casa Tomada" is to share his passion for using fiction writing to escape some type of reality in his life. It seems that he likes to play with emotional effects that makes readers explore beyond what they can see. In other words, he makes readers think deeply about impossible realms that bend physical laws, such as discovery and surprise.

REAL-LIFE EFFECT

Several real-life effects resulted from the "Casa Tomada" magical realism short story. Since Julio Cortazar leaves readers guessing what happens to the end of his short story, many people have interpreted it. An analyst, Fosco Lucarelli, from a blog site called Sock.com claims that, "A political read, where the tale is seen as an anti-Peronist allegory, interprets the house as no less than a metaphor for traditional Argentina. The occult forces could thus well be those sectors hitherto marginalized from the political activity; forces which are now able to progressively take over the country." This analyst sees Cortazar's short story from a political perspective. The "outsiders" in the story are seen as politicians who forced the siblings out of their house. Additionally, Goodreads.com, which is a reputable novel website, rated "Casa Tomada" with an overall 4.07/5.00 stars. Not only that, but this short story has received 461 ratings and 19 reviews.

PERSONAL EFFECT

I enjoyed reading "Casa Tomada" by Julio Cortazar. Although I am not a huge fan of magical realism, I thought that this short story was interesting because of how Cortazar used literary devices and symbolism to create an obscure tone. The author really made my brain think deeply about what is happening in the story. I came up with various interpretations of how the ending turned out. Part of the reason why I am not a huge fan of magical realism is because I often like to know the exact answer to an unfinished problem or event. At first, I thought that the "invaders" were migrant workers during the economy of Argentina in 1939 who were taking over the land of where the house is located to find jobs. This caused the siblings to eventually be kicked out of their own house because of fear. Then, I thought that the noises coming from the house was the actual house personified as a person that wanted to force the siblings to get out and finally start living their lives. Lastly, I thought that maybe the noises that Irene and the narrator heard were ghosts from their ancestors telling them to go out and find a new life. Since the noises caused the narrator to throw the key in the sewage, they are never to look back at their old life. I would like to know how Cortazar personally ended his story.

My main reason for choosing this artifact is to learn more about the Spanish culture. I am a Spanish major and someday I would like to become a community college Spanish professor. I discovered my passion for Spanish in high school during my sophomore year. At first, I did not like Spanish because it was difficult for me to learn the language during my freshman year in high school. In my sophomore year, I had a different Spanish teacher who taught the language differently. Everything seemed to click, and she made me realize why Spanish or any other language is important to learn. I have relatives from Argentina who speak Spanish and Laos. She made the point that I would not be able to communicate with them if I

did not learn one of those languages. Additionally, she told me that Spanish is one of the most widely used languages throughout the United States. Being bilingual has many benefits, and if I continued gaining fluency in Spanish it would open an easier path of learning other languages. So far, Spanish has opened me up to a whole new world. I have made new life-long friendships, experienced new things, and been exposed to diverse cultures. I am thankful for my experiences in Spain and Costa Rica because I was able to immerse myself in their cultures, and practice my Spanish skills in real life.

Works Cited

- The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Julio Cortazar." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 27 Jan. 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julio-Cortazar>
- Weiss, Jason. "Julio Cortazar, The Art of Fiction No. 83." *The Paris Review*, 12 June 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2955/julio-cortazar-the-art-of-fiction-no-83-julio-cortazar>.
- Study.com, Study.com, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/julio-cortazar-biography-short-stories-poems.html>
- History of the Haciendas and Estancias*, www.historichaciendas.com/history.php.
- Nag, Oishimaya Sen. "What Is The Hacienda System?" *WorldAtlas*, 13 Apr. 2016, www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-the-hacienda-system.html
- Lucarelli, Fosco, et al. "House Taken Over', by Julio Cortazar, (1944) Illustrated by Juan..."*SOCKS*, 11 Feb. 2015, <http://socks-studio.com/2013/02/20/house-taken-over-by-julio-cortazar-1944-illustrated-by-juan-fresan-1969/>.
- Cortazar, Julio, et al. "Casa Tomada [Cuento]." *By Julio Cortazar*, www.goodreads.com/book/show/21845071-casa-tomada-cuento.